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# Transgenre and Reality Drama in the Works of Mimi Barthélémy

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Both gentleman and slave, with different cultural means and to very different historical ends, demonstrate that forces of social authority and subversion or subalternity may emerge in displaced, even decentred strategies of signification. This does not prevent these positions from being effective in a political sense, although it does suggest that positions of authority may themselves be part of a process of ambivalent identification. Indeed the exercise of power may be both politically effective and psychically affective because the discursive liminality through which it is signified may provide greater scope for strategic manoeuvre and negotiation (*The Location of Culture*, 142)

Antillean Francophone female dramatists of Martinique and Guadeloupe exhibit common traits in their choice of aesthetics and poetics. Not only do they favor ordinary characters and gestures, but they also emphasize nontraditional staging, breaking away from a classical line of constraints that imposes the precepts of a *pièce bien faite*.<sup>1</sup> Thus the plays' structures are rethought not in acts and scenes, but in other forms, e.g., tableaux, parts, succession of numbers, and episodes. The audience's expectations are overturned as they cannot rely on a set system. In this theater, gesture is accompanied by music, sound, silence, scenery, space, props, lighting, and shadows as specified in the detailed stage directions. Hence the *metatext* becomes crucial for the director. Through this mode of representation, West Indian identity is reborn in the plays of women writers, where the "Collective Unconscious" mirrors itself. Although to date the plays are too few to form a canon *per se*, they exhibit a number of shared features: as works of art, they avoid imprisonment by labeling themselves in new systems of representation. Their spirit of defiance is further seen in the authors' refusal to theorize.<sup>2</sup>

Long ostracized by their contemporary male counterparts and theorists, Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Ina and Michèle Césaire, and Gerty Dambury, do not value academic recognition. On the contrary, they privilege popular performances that combine French and Creole, oral tales, and folklore with written text as a mark of their people's identity and recognition.<sup>3</sup> The authors consciously concentrate on an ethnographic rendition of the history of Caribbean people to

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give a voice to all, even to those lost in the torment of the construction of an identity usurped by slavery or colonial power. From a subaltern stance, a marginal space, a *third space*, dramatists “renew the past refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between space,’ that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present. The ‘past-present’ becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (Bhabha 10). Theater is thereby therapeutic in the sense that it pierces the giant abscess of painful memory to (re)construct an identity.

Mimi Barthélémy, a Haitian dramatist who lives in Paris and travels back and forth to her homeland, belongs to this third space in which she skillfully reconstitutes and preserves West Indian memory. A storyteller herself, as well as a seasoned writer and director, she has also received triple recognition as a *chevalier* by the French intelligentsia. She became Chevalier de l’Ordre National du Mérite in 2000, Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres in 2001, and received the Légion d’Honneur in 2010). Such high distinctions from the French Establishment attest to the quality of her work.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding, her primary concern is not to make her way through the Parisian hierarchy; instead, she aims to safeguard orality by restoring the cultural role of storytellers in her plays. She uses poetry and theater, written and oral, sound and word, reality and mysticism to transcend the very concept of genre. I define as “transgenre” her ability to combine all elements (poetry, theater, written, oral etc) where they overlap, interact and combine in a palimpsest of works blurring all parameters in a complete, unique, and complex fashion.<sup>5</sup>

In the French West Indies, storytellers played an essential role in the community during slavery. On the plantations, they served to keep the memory of their African ancestors alive as they relayed their heritage through oral tales, but they also represented a formidable means of resistance to the dominating colonial power. In essence, the storyteller provided slaves with moral and physical support through folklore, a highly effective tool of subversion. Patrick Chamoiseau explains that the storyteller’s audience is made of “crushed souls who expect wonder, forgetfulness, distraction, laughter, hope, excitement, the key to resistance and survival from him” (157). Nowadays, storytellers are scarce as they only appear in a few events during the year, such as funerals. With their gradual disappearance, the risk of losing an entire tradition looms large. Aware of this imminent danger, Barthélémy explains her devotion when in “Naissance d’une vocation: Tressage d’une vie d’artiste,” she comments as follows:

My artistic career is motivated by a triple commitment: first I am committed to the memory of the people of my country, second I want to be a storyteller who preserves the oral heritage of my people and third I am committed to be

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a Francophone artist who defends the French language, the one spoken in my homeland and the one spoken in my host country (n.p.)<sup>6</sup>

The choice of theater as a genre is a political one, influenced by her Colombian interface, by years of training as an actress, and by her working as a director in amateur and professional troupes.<sup>7</sup> So in what capacity do her works create a *founding myth* that transcends all genres, so as to lead to a compromise between French scripturality and Creole orality, mapped on an African canvas?<sup>8</sup> How does she reconcile French, African, and Antillean cultures by blurring markers in a catachrestic fashion?

### Defining transgenre: A Foucauldian Approach

Genres as we know them, those determined by a canon, do not only follow a hierarchical order, but also present a static form. In *The Archeology of Knowledge*, Michel Foucault underscores that there are “*displacements and transformations of concepts*” (4), a notion which, when applied to genre, necessarily implies “threshold, rupture, break, mutation, transformation” (5). This definition curiously echoes the Glissantian “chaos.” Interviewed by the newspaper *Le monde*, Edouard Glissant observes:

We live in a perpetual upheaval, in which civilizations intertwine, where full sections of culture tip over and mix, where those who are afraid of *métissage* become radicals. This is what I call “chaos-world.” We cannot direct the moment before to reach the moment after. Rationalism’s certainties no longer operate, the dialectic thought has failed, pragmatism no longer suffices, old thoughts of past systems cannot understand the chaos-world.... I believe that only thoughts that are unsure about their power, thoughts of a shaking provoked by fear, irresolution, fright, doubt, and ambiguity grasp better the unraveling entanglements. *Métisse* thoughts, open thoughts, Creole thoughts. (qtd in Joignot)

In this vein, Glissant underlines that chaos translates into “clash, harmony, conciliation, opposition, break, and juncture [...] among these concepts of time, myth, and cultures that join one another” (*Ecrire* 124). In its storytelling form, Mimi’s theater corresponds to this aporetic vision; first, as it moulds fragments of documents from the past and, second, as it brings back to life Antillean storytellers by restoring their lost voice.<sup>9</sup> Mimi Barthélémy celebrates the importance of the “live word” throughout history and the ethnography of her native land. The concept of “Orality” is often controversial because it stands half-way between the oral and literary tradition, pitting the world of the uneducated masses against that of the literate. The term was first coined by Ernest Mirville, and later redefined

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by the Haitian critic Maximilien Laroche in an effort to place it under a more favorable light, one which would reflect a cultural reality rather than one that disparages the evolution of written works that embrace both. Suzanne Dracius defends the concept in an interview:

One should not blush when using the term *Oraliture*, a component of the West Indian storytelling tradition, because, as in all literature, it stems from the serene Greek literature venerated mother of all Western literature, born from orality. Was Western literature not, originally, spread by the rhapsodes and the bards who, half-blind like Homer, used to strum on a lyre the songs of the *Iliad and the Odyssey*?" (Edwards, "Entretien avec Suzanne Dracius: La Kalazaza gréco-latine.")

In her drama, Mimi Barthélémy echoes this sentiment as she revives the *parole de nuit*, once a means for storytellers to empower slaves to defy the existing order on the plantations. This aspect differentiates West Indian storytellers from other storytellers who belong to diverse traditions and cultures. Beyond his social role, the storyteller stands as a cohesive agent for his people, who hope to eventually become individuals as opposed to mere commodities. In his own special language, one that is not always decipherable, the storyteller enters into a trance, making guttural sounds as if performing a voodoo ritual. Barthélémy transcribes on stage the characteristics of his opaque voice, differentiating between sound and spoken word. In this connection, it is worth recalling how Jacques Derrida distinguishes the two dimensions of voice when he states: "First of all there is the *phone*, a spiritual, live, expressive dimension; then there is the sound, the material dimension of the signifier, of the language in its repetitive form, one linked to death." (*Speech and Phenomena* 9)

The storyteller's breath is omnipresent in the works of Mimi Barthélémy; she never limits herself to a merely folkloric cultural display. Makward describes the author's blending of traditional elements in her sung tale *La Reine des poisons*:

Fundamental motifs of the Caribbean tradition are paired with universal motifs of other tales (Andromeda, the Minotaur, the Lernean Hydra, etc...), in which "death or the *femme fatale*... (in the West Indies called *Guiablese*)....a magical magnificent bewitching, and mortal woman [has] her positive double: the tall, beautiful, and generous *Reine des poisons*, who dies from love so that the poor fisherman continues to live. (Makward, "La Reine des poissons")<sup>10</sup>

Barthélémy traces Caribbean tales to long-standing mythological roots in the Western world in order to provide a more universal view in her message. Beyond the restitution of speech, she inscribes Caribbean tales in the panorama of world literature, thereby avoiding the stigmatization of belonging only to Francophone literature.

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In her multilayered play *Le Fulgurant: a mythical Epic*, Barthélémy stages an epic story in which philosophy and anthropology—universal truths—intertwine across different Antillean cultures.<sup>11</sup> Barthélémy insists on the human dimension of these topics as they are explored beyond geographical considerations. The play deals with the generational conflict between a young and an old bull, the latter serving a subversive role that a mother plays to encourage her son to rebel. Barthélémy reintroduces “all the values of courage, justice, and solidarity abolished by the arbitrary” (*Le Fulgurant*).<sup>12</sup> Moreover, she pursues her philosophical quest for truth when she chooses the characters for her play *Une très belle mort*.<sup>13</sup> In it, Old Iguana and Pink Flamingo reminisce about their respective lives and those that they have lost. This reflection on death is shared by the daughter Elodie who draws symbolic sand figures on stage. Christiane Makward describes this artistic creation as:

an ephemeral drama with poignant undertones for the spectator. Both women, mother and daughter, officiate in real life; one is an actress, the other a visual artist. One speaks with a voice and plays with her entire body, the other speaks with one hand, tracing drawings with white sand on stage and uttering only guttural noises. It is a delicate ceremony, almost a fresco, in which the iconographer feeds and adopts the spoken word and inscribes certain motifs of the actress’s discourse. She soon becomes surrounded by them, as if she were in a zone of the zodiac, a belly, in the heart of a symbolic and live Haiti. (“Oyez Haiti” 353)

In her Reality Drama,<sup>14</sup> Mimi Barthélémy mobilizes “the genius of the spoken word, the genius of the written one, and their field of convergence but also of their divergence” (Chamoiseau 158). Chamoiseau points to a rupture between the spoken Creole word, which is discriminated against, and the idealized French word. He talks about orality in a historical context of negations in which cultural values come together in a chaotic space. Chamoiseau prescribes that, to succeed in reconciling the spoken word with the written one, the writer must reach “an artistic creation capable of mobilizing this totality” through his or her own poetics (Chamoiseau, *Ecrire la Parole de nuit* 157-158). Mimi creates her own poetics when she harmoniously strikes a balance among all genres and then transcends them in a transgenre that is various combinations: drama and poetry, orality and the written word, sound and the articulated word. The sand drawings of Elodie resemble hieroglyphs with Persian, Mayan or Chinese origins, reminiscent of the abstract art of Paul Klee or Wassily Kandiski (Ruprecht 60). Alvina Ruprecht adds that “the light effects, the movements of the body, and the judicious use of props sculpt the scenic space, and transform the oral world of the tale into the material world on stage through a gallery of characters borrowed from Guadeloupian and

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Haitian mythologies” (60-1). It seems clear, however, that the author’s aim is to go beyond Caribbean mythology and send a message, one that may serve universal abstract concepts. In her latest play, *Trames* (2008), Guadeloupean dramatist Gerty Dambury uses the same device of a *théâtre metis* by mixing tragedy, comedy, tale and/or fable, to convey that the relationship between a mother and her son replays the memory of her people.<sup>15</sup> In her artistic creation, she presents “an anachronism of a palimpsest of memorial layers: staging personal, yet collective memory with the various expressions it may take and the danger it may entail: total reclusion” (Dechaufour). Dambury’s warning stands clear: West Indians must learn to use the memory of their past to move forward into the present and into the future.

Theater enables the construction of a fable, as is the case in *L’histoire d’Haïti racontée aux enfants*, published in 2008.<sup>16</sup> This is the bilingual (hi)story of Haiti told from the viewpoint of a child who would rather play the role of a marooned soldier than play hopscotch. Replete with historical details that encompass the country’s independence, the slave trade and black codes, it is woven into a Creole myth, where “Papa Bon Dieu,” a hymn to revolutionary Toussaint Louverture and to General Dessalines, comes to life. The reader will recall that Toussaint Louverture led a slave rebellion in 1791, which spread throughout the colony, and grew into a revolution, that brought about the abolition of slavery in 1794. The Haitian leader was later arrested on Napoleon’s orders, after a successful French expedition to the colony to reinstate slavery. Louverture was deported to France, where he died in 1803; Dessalines continued the struggle that led to Haitian independence in 1804. In *L’Histoire d’Haïti racontée aux enfants*, history is recounted through the simplified medium of a fable. Aesthetics intermingles with poetry and drama producing a tale of a hunter and a bird. Again, the fable’s origins evoke the classical world. Aesop, an Ethiopian slave living in ancient Greece, is credited with having created the genre. As Suzanne Dracius eloquently puts it, Aesop was:

a slave who shares the common thought with the West Indian storyteller that, even if the body is chained, the mind can escape through the maroon spirit. From the outset, any attempt to write for an Antillean is a form of *marronnage*, especially for women writers. It is the claim to individuality, the ascension toward the status of becoming an individual because the maroon leaves the informal magma of slavery.... The storyteller created stories that he was offering to other slaves, giving them a way to come out of the shapeless mass. Each one of them could give a different interpretation and, from it, stemmed all kinds of liberating thinking, the emancipating kind that would pull you up above the rank of *mancipium*, the human merchandise. (qtd in Arthéron)

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Likewise, Patrick Chamoiseau broadens the perspective when he prescribes that the Creole writer should inspire an audience “who come from all over the world but who are well aware of its infinite diversity. An audience whose perception of the world had to entirely reconstruct itself in the midst of disorder and chaos, and was able to find a balance in it” (*Ecrire* 157). This is the same role Mimi Barthélémy marvelously plays when she stages *Ti-moun fou* (her own youthful nickname) in *Caribana*. Her protagonist invites the audience to “listen, look, feel, and taste what she has to tell them.... A small piece of her Caribbean epic” (33). She is eager to tell her story and the history of her country, a common trait among women dramatists who fully embrace the concept of “unhomeliness,” where the personal realm reflects the public one. Similarly, in his introduction to *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha indicates that “the unhomey moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence” (15).

Yet it is important to note that Barthélémy operates subtly and does not overwhelm her audience. In *Les abus de la mémoire*, Tzvetan Todorov emphasizes that “recovery of the past is indispensable” if it is used to serve the present and the future (24). He quotes Jacques Le Goff to elaborate his point: “We should make sure that collective Memory serves to free people and not to enslave them” (24). Barthélémy applies herself to this task in her interstitial approach between the Western world and the West Indies, reconciling two traditions that history had wrenched apart. Hence it would be too restrictive to describe, think, and analyze her works solely in a “postcolonial” context, in which the prefix “post-” limits the scope to a well-defined temporal unit. Rather, her plays and tales must be apprehended as “trans-” because Mimi Barthélémy connects all the elements by means of ethnography, history, personal accounts, cultures, and her own culture, in order to go far beyond a denomination that would prevent her from being part of the literary world. Bhabha characterizes this “Beyond” as “a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion” (*Location* 1). Thus, Barthélémy blurs time and space when she stages several worlds that coexisted, in subversion and malignant hybridity, between the dominant and the dominated, between groups and individuals with diverse roots. Instead of losing herself in historical “temporal dislocation,” she gives restitution to history (Foucault 8). She traces the margins of a theater that needs redefining, articulates a word, and “opens a residual existence in the field of a memory” (Foucault 28). Furthermore she inscribes herself as a “Memory Woman,” the feminine version of Le Goff’s “Memory Man” whose role was to safeguard “the objective and ideological history of

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oral societies” (113). These male storytellers enabled a “generative reconstruction” without operating a “mechanical memorization” (113-114). On stage, the oral and the written combine to commemorate and perpetuate remembrance. Through her drama, Mimi creates a Site of Remembrance: (hi)story is no longer written by the colonizer, but by the formerly colonized.

### ***La Cocarde d'ébène* [The Ebony Cockade]**

To date, Barthélémy's seminal play remains *La Cocarde d'ébène*. The origins of the play are found in a tribute to the French Revolution bicentennial. The original musical, *Blue, White, and Black*, was directed by Claude Alranq in 1983 and dealt with the slave trade and the Santo Domingo rebellions between 1780 and 1794.<sup>17</sup> Warmly received by the Malian audience, it served as a draft for *La Cocarde d'ébène*.

The title, *The Ebony Cockade*, is an oxymoron that combines the colors of the revolutionary cockade (blue, white, and red) with black, the color symbolizing that of the slaves. While the 1789 French Revolution proclaimed “liberty, fraternity and equality for all French citizens,” these rights did not apply to plantation slaves, who numbered over half a million. *The Ebony Cockade* hence encapsulates the contrast between freedom and subservience: and the author thereby creates a positive space of liberation. She safeguards the hypermnesia<sup>18</sup> of her people's history through a cultural process viewed *in medias res*.

In the play's prologue, Claude Alranq insists that “the staging of the play had to take into account the various origins: African, Haitian, and French; Christian, animist, and rationalist; baroque, naïve, and Olympian...” (5). In order to “knead three cultures into one batter” (5), there needed to be a heterogeneous array of characters. Hence we find a voodoo princess, a libertine Queen, and a liberal savant; character distribution enriches historical figures with personal genealogy since Thénésile is also the first name of Mimi Barthélémy's grand-mother.

Throughout the play, the author incorporates and echoes the philosophy of Gaston Bachelard.<sup>19</sup> Each tableau begins with an allusion to one of the three elements: wind, fire, and water. For instance, the wind punctuates the Vespers tableau A, while a bloody bag has been left next to a mosquito screen. Flute and drums lend rhythm to the esoteric atmosphere. Mimi Barthélémy immediately plunges the spectator into magical realism.<sup>20</sup> This technique, combining reality, art and culture with the mystical world of *Quimbois*, has been the signature of Haitian writers.<sup>21</sup> Thus, in this first tableau, characters turn into animals during voodoo rituals. This cyclical world features the avatar of Dessalines, who scolds Thénésile for giving birth to a

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son, Cédoine, conceived with a white father, Olivier Sernin. The wind is one of the four elements used by Bachelard--in the play the downward swirling movement of air represents an oneiric transposition of history. Furthermore, the slave Ti-Mars disguising himself as Dessalines subverts power while a flute's melody entralls the place. Drums resonate as a warning, and then stop abruptly. The subsequent sudden silence stresses the fateful blowing of the wind.

In tableau B, fire is represented by the amoral Pauline Bonaparte, Napoleon Bonaparte's sister. She was married to General Leclerc, the Governor General appointed to Haiti/Santo Domingo in 1802. Leclerc played a key role in the abolition of slavery and in quelling the mutinies led by Toussaint Louverture. Pauline was known for her scandalous behavior. In the play, she recalls her promiscuous childhood when she was abused by her own family. Bachelard envisions fire as universal, the super-life. Yet it also signifies contrariness, disobedience, and dialectic opposites, all traits found in her character. The opaque representation of fire comes to life in a sacrificial ritual where Pauline weds Dessalines' avatar. Suddenly the revolutionary figure is reincarnated as a crab spider. Dessalines first opposes, then allies with, Napoleon Bonaparte, who in 1802 reinstated slavery in the colony and defeated in battle Leclerc (Pauline's husband), in Vertières, on November 18, 1803. Dessalines, however, eventually lead his people to freedom before being assassinated in 1806.

An evanescent princess vacillates between the real world and make-believe, in which ghosts of the Past and ghosts of *her past* reappear. She drops to the ground when weakened by stomach spasms. Her state of confusion comes to a climax when she tells Thénésile, the formally emancipated slave: "Nothing is more real than a shadow. A brother in arms and a husband who is not one: these are your shadows" (27). To give the ceremony a voodoo-ritual aura, French and Creole intermingle; it concludes with Pauline's indecipherable warnings. Barthélémy frequently uses this *interlangue* to better represent Haitian cultural variety.<sup>22</sup> The concreteness of words dissolves, and the discourse is "snatched from its inertia and, for a moment, it rediscovers something of its lost vitality" (*Archeology* 123). Barthélémy celebrates a persistence where "oblivion and destruction are in a sense only the zero degree of this remanence. And against the background that it constitutes, the operations of memory can be deployed" (*Archeology* 170). As a dramatist, Barthélémy participates in the archeology of knowledge by rewriting her (hi)story, "a preserved form of exteriority, a regulated transformation of what has already been written" (140). To use Bhabha's terminology, she is "ex-centric," "in the margins," as she does not solely rely on an established canon, but allies several other geographies to various histories. In the *avant-propos* to the French

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edition, Bhabha explains that the very interest of the *Location of culture* relies on a study of writers who, while in the margins, have to “survive, produce, work and create within a world system whose economic pulsions and major cultural investments point in another direction than their own” (11). Barthélémy excels in occupying this space at the crossroads, and does not care to comply with a set system to meet the requirements of a particular culture.

In turn she reproduces the *parole vive* on stage so as to remain faithful to the opaque voice of the storyteller, master of the night wor(l)d (Ludwig).<sup>23</sup> Christiane Makward underscores that Mimi’s works make use of “songs, Haitian Creole (with incorporated translations), traditional melodies and modern dances, and above all the impressive register of intonations and vocal noises of an artist with a perfectly refined diction” (*Ile en Ile* n.p.) This striking *métissage* is voiced in Thénésile’s rhetorical diatribe during the first tableau:

When on earth will we be strong enough to talk about ourselves without evoking France or Africa? Songs, tales, legends and letters, letters... From France [Cédoine’s] father never ceased to send him letters. Ten years of letters without a single hour of presence. Is it the voice of our roots? (*Cocarde* 18)

Urging her compatriots to stand up for themselves, Barthélémy places herself on the edge, in the interstitial space between the educated wor(l)d of the Parisian intelligentsia and the mass of the Haitian people, whose means of representation relies primarily on folklore. In the second tableau, she cunningly mixes each character’s background by using various languages interchangeably. Thénésile and Ti-Mars speak Creole, Pauline Bonaparte switches from her native Italian to French, as she weds the crab spider Dessalines in a voodoo ritual.

At the end of tableau B, the fire extinguishes itself and passion gives way to water. Water carries fictional and historical connotations in the play. It marks the return of the white man Olivier, father of Cédoine and lover of Thénésile, who left twenty years before to study medicine. According to Bachelard, water symbolizes the feminine element, an ultra-milk of the intimate geography. It is represented by the sea, which brings back the father and lover, but it also conveys the hope of abolishing slavery once and for all. In Caribbean culture, water is sometimes synonymous with danger, misfortune, and pain; it was the sea that allowed slave boats to arrive in the islands. The sea can be violent and a cause of natural disasters, which plague West Indian history. At other times, the sea represents the archipelago link, the “sanguinary earth” of Césaire, among Caribbean islands, whose residents were mostly slaves. Water as a dual connection has been a source of inspiration for many poets as well as a symbol of purification and power, as personified by Manman Dlo or Yemanjá, goddess of the sea.

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In tableau C, Olivier professes his love for his son Cédoine as he talks through the mosquito net where he thinks the boy is hiding. He confesses that Thénésile was once the boy's wet nurse (*Cocarde* 37). Thus Cédoine has been conceived by a slave mother through a white father who chose to fight slavery. The boy's destiny is imbued with hybridity and hope. Barthélémy skillfully selects this character to convey her message. The "Other" no longer resides in the margins, it has become exegetic, a full entity of hi(story). Cédoine's dual identity takes the form of a ghost since he is not physically present. We learn in the same tableau that he was violently dismembered for being the child of a white man and a slave. Bhabha offers an explanation of Cédoine's death when he stresses that during slavery, infanticide was an "act against the [colonial] system" (*Location* 24). The violence of such a revelation is conveyed by the image of choppy water in a basin that, in turn, points to the generally earthy atmosphere of tableau D. Stage directions read: "L'eau mouvante de la vasque fait basculer l'ambiance générale. Terreuse. Les tambours entrent vêtus de peau. Plumes et écorces" (*Cocarde* 41). In a voodoo ceremony, Pauline plays the role of a moderator between the historical reality of the slave trade and the funeral dance for a lost love. In this tableau, the earth represents the unchangeability of fact paired with a grim reality: the sacrifice of twenty million slaves sent to the Americas with a death rate of twenty per cent in the passage (Olivier 43).

The last tableau, nonetheless, leaves the spectator with a glimmer of hope. In it, the fusion is staged via three ships leaving for Africa, France, and an undisclosed destination. These vessels symbolize a new departure, a new start with the possibility of attaining liberty, equality, and fraternity for the victims of slavery and their descendants. The concluding ebony cockade symbolizes these sought-after human rights.

In conclusion, Mimi Barthélémy uses her "Reality Drama" to combine the history of Haiti, of slavery, and of her own, while historical figures intermingle with ordinary people, including those of her own genealogy. The actress-dramatist creates a *transgenre* that goes beyond the dystopian society that she (re)presents. On an optimistic note, she simultaneously celebrates her culture, a culture that is in the process of dynamic transformation, one that strives to integrate all horizons. Yet, all the while, she does not omit to convey how fundamental it is to her to remain rooted in all that is human, and therefore universal.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The *pièce bien faite* was a term coined by Eugène Scribe in the nineteenth century: it consisted of acts and scenes following the Greek model (Cf. Aristotle's *Poetics*). In seventeenth century France for instance, the *pièce bien faite* was the tragedy. It had to be structured according

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to the Greek model of five acts. While Aimé Césaire followed these precepts to gain recognition by the Parisian academia, women dramatists have chosen to follow their own set of rules in their plays. In this sense they resemble the post 1950s French *avant-garde* theater that chose to break with tradition. Ariane Mnouchkine's *Théâtre du soleil* is a good example of this revolutionary drama that appeals to the popular classes and brings a new light to staging and performance. Improvisation is used and multiple stages are in place: actors and audience interact as they become the performance.

<sup>2</sup> Yet to date, some authors such as Suzanne Dracius, have nonetheless enjoyed becoming part of the literary establishment... She uses all available media to promote her works. She has her own website, gives many interviews, attends all salons and fairs in Paris, and has even been advertised on TV in the popular French Sunday show "Vivement Dimanche" (2012).

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the analysis of Francophone women dramatists, see my book *Les Dramaturges Antillaises: Cruauté, Créolité, Conscience féminine*.

<sup>4</sup> Mimi Barthélémy comes from an educated mulatto family. She left Haiti at age sixteen to study in Paris. She married a diplomat and lived in Paris, Latin America, Sri Lanka, and Morocco from 1962 to 1972 (*Ile en Ile* n.p.). In the 1980s, she again studied in Paris and obtained a doctorate in Drama Studies.

<sup>5</sup> The term "transgenre" is a neologism often used as transgender. Here I alter its meaning to fit my thesis.

<sup>6</sup> All translations from French are mine.

<sup>7</sup> In Colombia, she discovered a political and activist theater. There she met various directors that would forever influence the way she stages plays and conveys her message.

<sup>8</sup> In his *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant introduces the notion of a founding myth or lack thereof. West Indians slaves were dispossessed of their origins. Clement Mbom explains that: "Composite cultures [...] cannot consider themselves as legitimate as they cannot refer to an ontological genesis or a founding myth since their collective birth is historical and their composition varies according to a predetermined place, time and given space." Barthélémy reconstructs this lost experience through her reality drama.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the difference between the live word and the written one, see my article: "L'authenticité tant anticipée: le conte antillais à la scène," forthcoming.

<sup>10</sup> Mimi Barthélémy and Amos Coulanges received the *prix de la Francophonie d'Acteurs d'Evry* in 1989 for the interpretation of this tale.

<sup>11</sup> She uses anthropological sources from the Haitian writer Rémy Bastien and the Cuban author Lydia Cabrera.

<sup>12</sup> *Le Fulgurant* was written as "a work of memory in celebration of the abolition of slavery on May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007" (See Barthélémy's remarks on her website). It was directed by Emmanuel Plassard.

<sup>13</sup> *Une très belle mort* was directed by Colombian filmmaker Nicolas Buenaventura Vidal. It was first performed in Paris at the Mandapa Center in June 2000, then produced in Avignon as part of the "off-festival" in 2001 and at the Théâtre de l'épée de Bois, Cartoucherie de Vincennes in September 2000-1 (Makward).

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<sup>14</sup> I am transferring the contemporary term “Reality TV” to “Reality Drama” to emphasize the raw exposition of someone’s life and daily reality. In reality drama personal genealogy and historical heritage are exposed regardless of the painful and disturbing effects they may have on the audience, when spectators identify with what unfolds before their eyes. Reality drama, just like reality TV, exhibits an uncanny form of voyeurism.

<sup>15</sup> *Trames* was produced by Gerty Dambury at the Théâtre du Musée Dapper, Fabrique insomnique in Paris in 2008, in Martinique, in April 2009, in Guadeloupe in May 2009, in the salle Boris Vian in Paris-La Villette in October 2009 and in the salle Benoît XII in Avignon in November 2009.

<sup>16</sup> A version of *L’Histoire d’Haïti racontée aux enfants* was titled *Soldats-Marrons*. It was directed by Barthélémy with the musician Serge Tamas. Written in 2009, it was produced in Guadeloupe, in Bruxelles in the Espace Senghor in 2000, and in Washington DC in 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Haiti was formally called Santo Domingo. Edouard Glissant calls it the “motherland” from where the revolution took place, the “*historical memory* that all West Indians will need one day” (*Caribbean Discourse* 498).

<sup>18</sup> The opposite of amnesia: from the Greek *hyper* “above” or “beyond” and *mimneskô* “recall.”

<sup>19</sup> See Gaston. Bachelard, *La psychanalyse du feu; La Terre et les rêveries du repos; L’air et les songes; L’eau et les rêves*.

<sup>20</sup> For more on magical realism and its role in building an identity through literature, read Jacques Alexis’s manifesto: Alexis, Jacques Stephen, “Prolégomènes à un manifeste du Réalisme merveilleux des Haïtiens,” in a special issue of the proceedings of the 1er Congrès International des Écrivains et Artistes Noirs (Paris: *Présence Africaine* 8-10, 1956 : 245-71). It is important to underscore that many critics differentiate “marvelous realism” from “magic realism,” especially in different narratives. It pertains to Haitian literature and Latino writers.

<sup>21</sup> *Quimbois* is a West Indian cultural practice encompassing spiritual, esoteric, and voodoo rituals.

<sup>22</sup> Or is it Barthélémy speaking here favoring the diglottic marriage between French and Creole, a complex interchangeable use of both languages so that each enriches the other in a playful symbiosis? *In Praise of Creoleness*, the manifest written by Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, glorifies this interlanguage, as a means of erasing the repressed use of Creole. The manifest denounces the exclusive use of French by many Haitian writers such as Jacques Roumain, Jacques Stephen Alexis, Jean Brière, Magloire Sait-Aude, René Depestre or René Bélance ...

<sup>23</sup> *Parole vive* is a term frequently used by Jacques Derrida to designate the sign, the spoken word as opposed to the written one.

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